

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**WAGING WAR FOR PEACE:  
ANWAR SADAT'S OCTOBER 1973 OFFENSIVE**

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## **WAGING WAR FOR PEACE: ANWAR SADAT'S OCTOBER 1973 OFFENSIVE**

Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat's decision to go to war against Israel in 1973 was based on a coherent, consistent, and well-crafted strategy that effectively employed limited war to achieve clearly defined political goals. Sadat's strategy took into account the threats and risks that he faced, along with the opportunities that could be exploited within the international and domestic context. Before embarking on war, Sadat exhausted virtually every available instrument of statecraft in his effort to create a new political-military dynamic that would facilitate negotiations with Israel and thus regain the territory that Egypt lost in the 1967 Six-Day War.

In retrospect, some analysts might criticize Sadat for pursuing a risky military strategy to achieve his political goals. However, it seems clear that the other instruments of statecraft, including his skillful use of diplomacy, were insufficient without the application of credible military force. For his part, Sadat firmly believed that only shock therapy, applied through the trauma of war, would shake Israeli leaders from their confidence that continued control of the occupied territories was their best guarantee of security. In addition to Israeli intransigence (and superpower indifference), growing domestic unrest in Egypt made the option of war even more compelling for Sadat, especially in light of internal challenges to his legitimacy.

Once he had decided on the use of force, Sadat's strategic dilemma centered on balancing means and ends. He was able to maximize his limited means by bringing to bear other instruments of statecraft to buttress his military strategy. To this end, he used his alliances with the Soviets and other Arab states to offset Israeli military superiority; he employed creative diplomacy (in the United Nations, the Organization of African

Unity, and the Non-Aligned Movement) to garner international support for his political goals; and he effectively wielded the Arab “oil weapon” when the United States later intervened in the war on behalf of Israel.

To his credit, Sadat ensured that his means remained subordinate to the ends that he sought, even forgoing the temptation of broadening his initial goals in the Sinai after achieving a string of impressive tactical successes. This consistency of purpose was characteristic of Sadat’s strategic thinking; indeed, it reflected his profound understanding of the relationship between waging war and shaping the peace in pursuit of clear policy objectives.

#### I. Strategic Context: Volatile Domestic Politics, Unfavorable International Trends

Sadat faced stark choices as he surveyed the domestic and international landscape early in his presidency. He had inherited the legacy (and burden) of Nasser’s unsuccessful bid to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict on terms that were favorable to Egypt. Israel’s humiliating defeat of Egypt and its Arab allies in 1967 had produced a complex set of problems. Egypt’s armed forces remained demoralized by their poor performance in the disastrous Six-Day War. Sadat understood that Egypt and its Arab allies were too weak to negotiate with Israel, the success of which was unlikely in any event given Israel’s satisfaction with the status quo. Thus, one of his top priorities was to restore the confidence of Egypt’s military and, more broadly, restore Arab honor.

Sadat also needed to establish his own legitimacy as Nasser’s rightful heir, a task complicated by challenges from both Islamists and the Nasserite left. While Islamists

viewed Sadat as an advocate of Nasser's secular policies, Nasserites doubted Sadat's commitment to his predecessor's principles. Sadat's tenuous political status was exacerbated by the Egyptian economy, which was burdened by the costs of continued military mobilization and the loss of revenues from the Suez Canal. His failure to fulfill his often-repeated public pledge to liberate the occupied territories added to Arab reluctance to subsidize indefinitely Egypt's moribund economy. The stalemate over the occupied territories also threatened Sadat's political status as well as Egypt's national interests. In the end, domestic unrest was a key factor in Sadat's decision to use war as an instrument of statecraft.<sup>1</sup>

On the international front, Sadat believed that superpower détente had undercut his ability to leverage U.S.-USSR mediation in the Arab-Israeli dispute. He recognized that the Soviets were wary of risking their improved relationship with the United States by providing Egypt with weapons to conduct an offensive war against Israel. Sadat's doubts about the reliability of the Soviet Union as an ally were reinforced by Moscow's meddling in Egypt's domestic affairs. As a result, he expelled Soviet military advisers from Egypt in 1972 (a move that also served his broader political-military objectives in preparation for his surprise attack on Israeli forces).

On the U.S. side, Henry Kissinger had offered a sobering assessment of the strategic dilemma that Sadat faced: in essence, either change the facts on the ground or accept Israel's terms for peace.<sup>2</sup> In view of this blunt analysis of Egypt's options, Sadat

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<sup>1</sup> The Insight Team of the London *Sunday Times*, "Sadat Decides on War," in *The Yom Kippur War* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1974), 48.

<sup>2</sup> Anwar Sadat, *In Search of Identity: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 238.

concluded that Washington was unwilling to exert diplomatic pressure on Israel, particularly when U.S. interests in the Middle East were not threatened by the status quo.

The international constraints on Sadat's strategic options crystallized in May 1972, when the United States and the Soviet Union issued a joint statement advocating an arms moratorium in the Middle East. Sadat realized that superpower détente was now tipping the military balance even more decisively in favor of Israel. A freeze on arms sales would benefit Israel, which already possessed a clear military advantage and was able to manufacture some of its own weapons. Israel could exploit this advantage by playing for time, hoping that the international community would eventually acquiesce to Tel Aviv's expanded borders. This concern became an important factor in Sadat's evolving strategy.

## II. National Interests: Exploiting Opportunities and Advancing Political Ends

Egypt's national interests centered on political stability, economic development, social cohesion (founded on Islamic values), and preservation of Egypt's traditional leadership role in the Arab world. Based on these core interests, Sadat defined his principal political objectives vis-à-vis Israel as follows: Israeli participation (without preconditions) in third-party brokered peace talks, active superpower (especially U.S.) engagement in the negotiations, and restoration of the pre-1967 borders.

In pursuit of these objectives, Sadat developed a strategy that initially focused on diplomacy as his main instrument of statecraft. He sought to strengthen the Arab front, while shaping it to advance his own objectives. During regional rounds of diplomacy, Sadat carefully laid the groundwork for wielding the Arab "oil weapon" to win West

European and Japanese political support for his cause at a key point in the war.<sup>3</sup>

(Although the Arab decision to withhold oil to the West proved effective in bringing pressure external to bear on Israel, this tactic did run the risk of alienating Western support for Egypt's cause.)

Sadat also took advantage of international organizations to isolate Israel. In addition to cultivating the support of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), he secured a symbolic victory when the Organization of African Unity (OAU) issued a strong condemnation of Israel in May 1973. Similarly, Sadat won UN Security Council support for an Egyptian-backed resolution that condemned Israel for the assassination of three Palestinian leaders. He later cited the critical role of this diplomatic campaign in achieving his broader strategic goals.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, there were limits to what Sadat could achieve through diplomacy alone, especially given the widespread perception of Egypt's military weakness.

### III. Sadat's Evolving Strategy: Balancing Risks and Means

In tandem with these diplomatic initiatives, Sadat continued to prepare his armed forces for the possibility of war with Israel. Throughout this period, he remained alert to the risks that might jeopardize his evolving political-military strategy. On this score, Sadat feared that the fighting capabilities of the Egyptian armed forces would further decline vis-à-vis those of Israel. Moreover, the prevailing condition of "no war, no peace" was having a deleterious effect on Egypt's social fabric as well as its armed

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<sup>3</sup> Bard E. O'Neill, "The October War: A Political-Military Assessment," *Air University Review* 25 (July-August 1974), 31.

<sup>4</sup> Sadat, 240.

forces. Conscription had been extended to five or six years, which meant that a large, well-educated segment of Egyptian young men remained mobilized, thereby further draining an already ailing economy. This situation was generating dangerous social and military pressures on the Egyptian government.<sup>5</sup>

While Egyptian and Arab armed forces (and their economies) were deteriorating, Israel was strengthening its military position, particularly in the occupied territories. Tel Aviv's political-military objective was to retain the occupied territories, which provided defense in depth for the Israeli homeland. Given Israel's seeming intransigence on this point, Sadat's attempt to break the diplomatic impasse was unlikely to succeed, especially without superpower support or a credible threat of military force. With tensions rising in the region, Sadat also had to take into account the possibility that Israel might launch a preemptive military strike as it did in 1967.

For Sadat, this uncertain peace seemed increasingly more costly than the risks entailed in a war with Israel. However, the main problem for Sadat was how to muster the military means to attain his political ends. At the strategic level, he forged a secret alliance with Syria that bolstered Egypt's limited capabilities by ensuring that Israel would be forced to fight on two fronts in the coming conflict. In another major move, he won Moscow's agreement to supply sufficient weapons to pursue his military objectives.

#### IV. Making War to Achieve Peace: Sadat's Decision to Use Military Force

From the outset, Sadat's strategic thinking was based on a key assumption – Israel's security strategy was premised on the principle of deterrence, which meant intimidation

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<sup>5</sup> Mohammed Abdel Ghani-El-Gamasy, *The October War* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1993), 175.



of its Arab neighbors, militarily, politically and psychologically. According to this view, Israel's strategy aimed at persuading the Arab states that defying Israel was futile; instead, they should accept and accommodate Israel.<sup>6</sup> Sadat believed the Israeli position had hardened since the 1967 war, particularly in the absence of superpower pressure on Tel Aviv to implement UN Security Resolution 242, which, *inter alia*, called on Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories.

Since the Arab military debacle in 1967, most Egyptians had viewed war with Israel as inevitable. In fact, Nasser had begun preparations for such a war and Sadat had followed in the steps of his mentor. Sadat believed, and Soviet leaders concurred, that the United States perceived Egypt as too weak militarily to challenge Israel. This perception was confirmed by Kissinger's blunt assessment of the strategic dilemma facing Sadat – either accept Israel's terms for peace or demonstrate the military capabilities to challenge the balance of power.

For his part, Sadat recognized that he was too weak politically to survive any concessions that he might have to make in negotiations with Israel. Given his limited options, Sadat concluded that war was the most viable alternative to create the conditions that might lead to negotiations with Israel on more favorable terms. Indeed, he became convinced that only shock therapy, applied through the trauma of war, could change the prevailing psychological and political dynamic in the Middle East. Despite his repeated public warnings and military preparations, Sadat's decision to go to war caught all parties

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 189.

by surprise – Israel, the Soviet Union, and the United States – a grave miscalculation, as Kissinger later acknowledged.<sup>7</sup>

#### V. Lessons of the Past: Searching for a Military Strategy

Sadat knew that a decisive military defeat of Israel was beyond Egypt's capabilities. Instead, he sought to achieve diplomatic advantage through a credible use of military force. Sadat's challenge was to develop a feasible strategy that would negate Israel's overall dominance. After reviewing the lessons of the Six-Day War and the subsequent War of Attrition, Sadat and his military commanders initially failed to find a satisfactory solution to Egypt's strategic dilemma.

In the Six-Day War, Israeli air and armored forces demonstrated that Egypt could not compete with Israel in a war of mobility, which was Tel Aviv's preferred military strategy. Egypt's air force had been unable to provide sufficient air cover to protect operations on the ground during that war. Given these constraints, Sadat and his senior commanders ruled out any attempt to regain the Sinai through a large-scale war involving maneuver and air attack.

Egypt's high command also considered the option of attrition warfare, which offered a certain appeal because Egypt's numerical advantage in manpower seemed to favor the strategy of a static war. According to this view, Egypt's well-entrenched forces would be able to neutralize Israel's superiority in maneuver warfare. Static wars also generally entail heavy human losses, offering Egypt a possible means to weaken Israel's political will by exploiting its aversion to taking high casualties.

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<sup>7</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, Inc. 1982), 485.

Sadat's senior commanders eventually ruled out this strategy as a viable option because of Egypt's experience in the War of Attrition. During that conflict, Israel demonstrated its ability to inflict disproportionate pain on Egypt. Israel also had negated much of the defender's advantage by skillfully incorporating mobility into its operations and by successfully employing its aircraft against Egypt's surface-to-air missile defenses. In any event, Sadat knew that Israel was unlikely to be drawn into another static war. He also was fully aware that any attempt to renew attrition warfare ran the risk of provoking a massive Israeli reaction.<sup>8</sup>

In developing an appropriate strategy, Egyptian military leaders also had to take into account the threat of Israeli air strikes on Cairo and other major population centers as well as the country's economic infrastructure. During the War of Attrition, Israel had carried out punishing attacks on Egypt's interior. Based on this experience, Egyptian commanders concluded that they would have to acquire the means to counter this threat – ideally, by gaining a comparable threat to Israel's main cities – before launching a military offensive.

Israel's dominance in the region stemmed from its mastery of military and technological skills. Although the majority of Israeli forces were reservists, they were well trained and could be mobilized quickly. Additionally, Israel could count on the United States for financial and military aid. Despite these strengths, Israeli leaders also had to contend with a number of weaknesses – a relatively small population averse to casualties; an economy weakened by high defense spending; and a large frontier,

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<sup>8</sup>O'Neill, 15.

including the occupied territories, which were difficult to defend.<sup>9</sup> Sadat's strategy sought to offset some of Israel's strengths while exploiting its weaknesses.

#### VI. Egypt's Military Plan: A War of Limited Aims

Sadat's military strategy was firmly grounded in Clausewitz's concept of an offensive war with limited aims.<sup>10</sup> His main military goal was to seize and hold a small amount of territory in the Sinai, which would strengthen Egypt's hand in postwar negotiations with Israel. To this end, Sadat's strategy included a surprise attack on Israeli forces in the Sinai combined with a simultaneous Syrian attack on the Golan Heights aimed at diffusing Israel's military strength in a two-front war. His strategy also called for tactics designed to inflict heavy casualties on the Israeli Defense Force (IDF).

Although this strategy ran the risk of developing into a general war, Sadat assumed that a series of Arab tactical successes – however limited – would prompt the intervention of the United States and the Soviet Union. He also thought that a strong performance by Arab forces would compel Israel to reconsider its views on the continued viability of the status quo. In this regard, he believed that inflicting massive casualties on the IDF and imposing heavy costs on the Israeli economy would convince the Israelis to make concessions leading to their withdrawal from the occupied areas.

By demonstrating the IDF's vulnerability, Sadat thought that Israel would be forced to reconsider its belief that this buffer zone in the Sinai provided adequate

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<sup>9</sup>Hassan El Badri, Taha El Magdoub, and Mohammed Dia El Din Zohdy, "Decision and Concept," in *The Ramadan War of 1973* (Dunn Loring, VA: T.N. Dupuy Associates, Inc., 1978), 15.

<sup>10</sup>Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 611-12.

security. Additionally, by raising the prospect of a superpower confrontation Sadat sought to engage Washington and Moscow in the search for a negotiated settlement.<sup>11</sup> Finally, by inducing other Arab nations to withhold oil supplies Sadat hoped to coerce Western nations to pressure Israel to reach a peace agreement that was more favorable to Egypt.

Israel faced a dilemma in trying to defend both the strategically important Golan Heights and the large and remote Sinai Peninsula against a carefully coordinated Egyptian-Syrian attack. Protecting such a wide expanse required more forces than the IDF had on active duty. Contingency plans called for reservists to be rushed to the front when an attack seemed imminent; in the Sinai, they would establish a defense along the heavily fortified Bar Lev line near the Suez Canal.

This defensive strategy was predicated on having sufficient warning to mobilize and deploy reservists before the attack was launched. Israeli planners assumed the Arabs would not attack as long as they lacked air superiority. In any event, they believed that no attack would come without at least 24-48 hours of warning, which would give the IDF time to mobilize and deploy its reserves. Israel's superior air power and mobile armored forces would then take the offensive, while the United States (presumably) would move quickly to broker a diplomatic solution that would not jeopardize Israel's core interests.

Egypt's plan sought to capitalize on this key aspect of Israeli strategy by exploiting the element of surprise and thus delaying mobilization of IDF reserves. Egyptian forces would attack across the Suez Canal, overwhelm the Bar Lev defensive positions and establish bridgeheads 10 to 15 kilometers deep. After this initial success,

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<sup>11</sup> O'Neill, 32.

Egyptian forces would establish defensive positions designed to inflict heavy casualties on Israeli forces attempting to dislodge them. Surface-to-air missiles and anti-tank weapons would be deployed in these forward positions to counter Israel's anticipated response.<sup>12</sup>

In a move aimed at complicating Israel's defensive strategy, Sadat had made secret arrangements with Syria to attack Israeli positions in the Golan Heights, forcing Israel to fight a two-front war. Egyptian planners hoped that Israeli engagement in the north would allow the Egyptian army to breach the Bar Lev line and establish entrenched bridgeheads in the Sinai before Israeli reserves were in place.

To implement this strategy, Egypt needed to create a strategic deterrent that would protect its population centers and critical infrastructure. Egypt sought to achieve this deterrent by acquiring advanced Soviet-made weapons, including surface-to-surface missiles as well as aircraft with a range and payload capable of putting Israel's population centers at risk. At the tactical level, Egypt sought an asymmetrical advantage to offset Israel's superior air and armored forces by acquiring sophisticated Soviet-made air defense systems and anti-tank weapons. Sadat also prodded his senior commanders to focus on recruiting and training a military force that possessed the technical skills to take advantage of advanced Soviet weaponry. Sadat believed that these new capabilities would enhance the prospects of success for Egypt's planned ground offensive.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> El Badri, 19-24.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

## VII. Strategy Implementation: A Very Close Call

The first few days of the war were the most critical for Israel, which relied on its regular army and the few reservists on duty to slow the advance of Arab troops while Israeli reserves were mobilized and deployed to the front lines. By the second day of the war, three Egyptian bridgeheads had been established in the Sinai, extending along a six-mile front. Egypt's army and air force had blunted a strong counter-attack by Israeli armored forces, destroying more than 140 Israeli tanks and inflicting heavy casualties on the IDF. At this point, it seemed that Egyptian forces had achieved complete surprise and Sadat had achieved his main military objective in the Sinai.<sup>14</sup> The effectiveness of Soviet equipment, both anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons, was reflected in the IDF's setbacks during those initial days of the war. In response, the United States airlifted massive amounts of materiel to shore up faltering Israeli troops.

While reeling in the Sinai, Israeli forces soon turned the tide of battle in the Golan Heights after narrowly averting a major Syrian breakthrough on that strategic front. Despite heavy losses, Israeli forces pushed back the Syrians in the north and then launched an armored thrust on Syria's heartland. This IDF drive towards Damascus forced Sadat to amend his strategy in order to relieve Israeli pressure on the Syrian front. He ordered his commanders to move beyond their well-defended bridgeheads in the Sinai, thereby exposing Egyptian forces to the superior Israeli air power and armored mobility that Sadat's original strategy had sought to negate. This move allowed the IDF to mount a counter-attack across the west bank of the Suez Canal, which severely

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<sup>14</sup> A.H. Farrar-Hockley, "The October War," in *The Arab-Israeli War, October 1973: Background and Events*, Adelphi Paper #111 (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies IISS, Winter 1974-75), 22.

disrupted Egyptian operations. Israeli forces managed to isolate major elements of the Egyptian Third Army and might have destroyed them had it not been for superpower intervention.

In the end, Sadat's effective use of military force as shock therapy did in fact strengthen his bargaining position in subsequent peace talks with Israel – but the implementation of his strategy had been a very close call. If the Israelis had succeeded in destroying Egypt's Third Army, Sadat's strategy would have unraveled and his government would have been in grave danger. As it turned out, Sadat's assumptions about Syria's ability to hold its own in the north were flawed, forcing Egypt to alter its well-crafted defensive strategy in the Sinai. On the other hand, Sadat's assumptions regarding superpower intervention were on the mark – after hostilities broke out, the United States and Soviet Union moved quickly to broker negotiations that ultimately led to Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai. Over the longer run, Sadat's successful strategy led Israel to accept the principle of “land for peace” as the basis for subsequent negotiations with key Arab players. This breakthrough also paved the way for Sadat's historic visit to Israel in 1977 and the subsequent landmark Camp David accords.

#### VIII. Sadat's Strategy: Waging War to Shape the Peace

From the outset, Sadat realized that his tenuous political position and the prevailing international situation imposed serious constraints on his ability to achieve three interrelated goals – political stability, economic development, and return of the occupied territories. He could not achieve his first two goals without regaining the territory that Egypt had lost to Israel in the Six-Day War. Sadat also understood that he would have to



use virtually every instrument of statecraft in order to offset Israel's overall advantage in military and economic power.

In retrospect, some analysts might criticize Sadat for embarking on a risky military strategy to achieve his political goals. However, it seems clear that the other instruments of statecraft, including his skillful use of diplomacy, were insufficient without the application of credible military force. In addition to Israeli intransigence (and superpower indifference), growing domestic unrest in Egypt made the option of war even more compelling for Sadat, especially in light of internal challenges to his legitimacy.

Once he had decided on the use of force, Sadat's strategic dilemma centered on balancing means and ends. Sadat was able to maximize his limited means by pursuing other instruments of statecraft to buttress his military strategy. He used his alliances with the Soviets and other Arab states to offset Israeli military superiority; he used diplomacy (in the UN, OAU, and NAM) to garner broad international support for his political goals; and he effectively wielded the Arab "oil weapon" when the United States intervened on behalf of Israel.

The decisive factor that enabled Egypt to challenge Israel was the adoption of a limited-aims strategy. Sadat and his commanders had learned the lessons of past wars with Israel and had developed a strategy to overcome key weaknesses. For example, Egypt acquired sophisticated Soviet offensive missiles that diminished the threat of Israeli air attacks on Egypt's interior. Sadat also wisely ruled out the strategies of either a general war or a war of attrition, both of which would have run the risk of another humiliating defeat. By pursuing limited aims, Sadat was able to adopt an asymmetric

approach that protected Egypt's modest territorial gains (thus enhancing its later bargaining position), while negating several intrinsic Israeli advantages.

Sadat's strategic objective in the 1973 war was as much psychological as military; he sought to undermine the very basis of Israel's security doctrine. While falling short of a decisive military victory, Egyptian and Syrian forces demonstrated that Israel would never be sufficiently safe from the threat of an Arab attack, no matter how much territory Israel occupied. This shock therapy forced Israeli leaders to reconsider the most basic assumptions that formed the foundation of their security doctrine.

In sum, Sadat developed a coherent and inclusive strategy, which he pursued with a clear and consistent purpose. This strategy was based on a solid understanding of the constraints that he faced as well as the risks that were entailed in each of the strategic options that he and his commanders considered before embarking on war. To his credit, Sadat ensured that his ends were always subordinate to his means, even forgoing the temptation of broadening his initial goals in the Sinai after achieving a string of impressive tactical successes. This consistency of purpose was characteristic of Sadat's strategic thinking; indeed, it reflected his profound understanding of the relationship between waging war and shaping the peace in pursuit of clear policy objectives.